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Second thoughts on Gates

When the president nominated Robert M. Gates to succeed William Casey as head of the Central Intelligence Agency, we expressed our support. The president has a right to choose his own advisers, and Mr. Gates had been a dutiful deputy, before and after Mr. Casey's incapacity. But the fallout from Mr. Gates's confirmation hearings this week suggests the need for careful reflection.

Knowledgeable critics of the nominee, while praising his courage, intellect, integrity, and professionalism, seem less than excited over his commitment to the effective tools of the intelligence craft and his understanding of how they can be used to further American objectives around the world. As a protege of Director Stansfield Turner, who purged the CIA's clandestine branch in an attempt to convert the agency into a high-tech think tank, Mr. Gates, it is feared, may be uneasy with the Reagan Doctrine and the covert measures necessary to carry it out.

Questions have been raised as well about Mr. Gates's role in the national intelligence estimates the CIA has issued since he became deputy director for intelligence in 1982. One estimate for which he was responsible concluded last year that Soviet military

spending had not increased for a decade. Another report challenged administration allegations that the Soviets had violated arms control agreements.

Such actions may account for *The Washington Post's* belief that Mr. Gates's nomination represents a triumph for a "professional policy-neutral intelligence directorate." *The Post* is known to fall into the trap of supposing that scuttling anti-Communist policies is "neutral" and that those who mistrust Soviet intentions, or seek to counter them, are hateful and prejudiced.

Finally comes the question of Mr. Gates's political capacities. With both houses of Congress held by the enemies of his foreign policy, Mr. Reagan might be better advised to have a CIA chief who can deal with lean and hungry Democrats from a position of strength. Faith in Mr. Gates's ability or inclination to do so was not strengthened any this week by his eagerness to bend the knee to congressional inquisitors.

Mr. Reagan's supporters in the Senate ought to seek to resolve these doubts before offering their support of the nominee. If the answers turn out not to be so good, the president ought to be urged to reconsider the appointment.